

Julia Kristeva: Rhetoric and the Woman as Stranger

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In this essay I am going to return to the themes of otherness and colonial ideology with which this volume begins. Like Aspasia, Julia Kristeva is a stranger from the East; like Aspasia, she reminds us of an "Asian" rhetoric, a practice linked with excess, passion, and what Susan Jarratt and Rory Ong call a "dangerous femininity." The theme of strangeness marks the way woman unsettles language. But it is this very unsettling that has made rhetoric interesting again. Rather than reclaiming a place for women within a tradition of rhetoric that has excluded so many, the figure of Rhetorica gives rhetoric itself a new life, changing it from within to accommodate women and other strangers. Julia Kristeva argues in favor of a transformation in our ways of dealing with one another. According to her recent pleas on behalf of a more humane internationalism, we need to cease our struggles to eliminate or deny strangers; we need to acknowledge the strangeness within. And for Kristeva, woman is the prototypical stranger. She believes that the rhetoric against foreigners is a great danger to democracies in the West right now, and that the traditions of cultural and linguistic identity based on exclusion must be changed, at every level, from the personal to the international. There are high stakes involved in finding more inclusive forms of argument. It is Kristeva who first introduced the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin to the West, in the Paris of the 1960s. The dialogism that has provided feminist rhetoricians such as Dale Bauer (as well as male rhetoricians such as Charles Schuster) with a more promising model for rhetoric has been elaborated in Julia Kristeva's theoretical works.

Julia Kristeva shows us how the very marginality of rhetoric in relation to truth and of woman in relation to power is important to post-structuralist philosophy and psychoanalysis. It is marginality that inaugurates the dialogic. She advocates a notion of cultural and personal identity which recognizes that the strangeness of the other is a strangeness within. At the level of the state, this implies the acceptance of foreigners. At the level of the individual, this implies the recognition of the unconscious. Identity, then, must be seen as provisional rather than exclusive, constructed as an effect of the heterogeneous processes of discourses. This unsettling of a singular and dominant ethos mitigates the way negativity functions in a purifying logic of either/or to create scapegoats and paranoia. As she brings these concerns together, Kristeva emphasizes the *ethical* dimensions of such a project.

Before I begin to explain, let me say a few words about Julia Kristeva's unusual history. She grew up in Bulgaria, the daughter of parents who did not belong to what she calls the "red bourgeoisie," so that she did not have access to the special education of the communist elite. Nonetheless, she went to a French *école maternelle* from an early age, and when she grew older, studied French at a second school that met after regular school hours. How did this education under the Bulgarian regime affect her perspectives? The freedoms afforded her by another language while she was under the constraints of a totalitarian society impressed themselves upon her, as she notes in an interview with me and Kathleen Hullery:

The experience in Bulgaria permitted me at once to live in an extremely closed environment (which is called totalitarian for good reason, with enormous constrictions), to understand the weight of social life, and at the same time to try to find the small spaces of freedom, which are, for example: the arts, the interest in foreign languages, even religion. (172)

She went on to graduate school, to work on the "new novel," and won a scholarship sponsored by the French government to study in Paris. Nonetheless, she managed to get the opportunity to go only when the dogmatic director of the institute was out of town. She left precipitously and arrived in Paris in 1965, just before Christmas, with only five dollars in her pocket and no funds due for a couple of months. Fortunately, she fell upon an intellectual community there which welcomed her and found her work interesting. Soon she was giving a lecture in

Roland Barthes's seminar, and he was so impressed that he had it published.

She was only twenty-five, a foreigner, and a woman, but she brought with her the first understanding of Bakhtin's dialogism and a thorough grounding in Soviet linguistic research and Marxist scholarship. She had the perspective to reveal the inadequacies of structuralism at the very moment Paris was moving into the poststructuralist revolution. She became part of the avant-garde *Tel Quel* group, she married novelist Philippe Sollers; she participated in the great upheaval of French intellectual life marked by the events of 1968, along with Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and again Roland Barthes. This is to say that Julia Kristeva's work at once exemplifies poststructuralism and emphasizes the strangeness within it marked by her femininity and her foreignness. She both embodied and theorized the *différence* that entered French discourse.

Kristeva soon began to publish essays and books, working out a theory that brings together linguistics, semiotics, literary and cultural history, and psychoanalysis. Even her first works remain interesting for their innovative approach to thinking about woman and the subject of discourse (parts of *Polylogue*, *Semiotike*, and *About Chinese Women* appear in translation in *Desire in Language* and *The Kristeva Reader*). In 1972 she published her doctoral thesis, *The Revolution in Poetic Language*, which developed a theory of how what she calls the *semiotic* and *symbolic* aspects of language interact. She argued that the historical crisis of modernity, with the old foundations no longer providing credible support to culture, requires not the repression of irrationality but a revolution in our language.

The theory set forth in *Revolution* privileges forms of discourse that are heterogeneous and dialogic, allowing subversive elements into play (for example, the elements Bakhtin called the "carnavalesque"). In *Revolution*, she focuses in particular on the poetic language of writers such as Mallarmé, a use of language that is not based on trying to exclude or constrain its gestural, rhythmic, repetitive component (the "semiotic"). Poetic language may be thought of as "revolutionary," according to Kristeva, not because it plays a direct part in politics, but because it changes the very forms of discourse, making new expressions possible, by liberating the "semiotic"—in Mallarmé's case, musicality—to rupture the constraining regularities of the "symbolic." Think of the "symbolic" as linguistic law and order, including not only the important conventions that make language seem *clear* but also the conventions that enforce

is to the truth of science. Freud does not present himself as a rhetorician, but as a scientist, and the truth he claims is the truth of philosophy. As Cynthia Chase has pointed out, this allegiance continues in the work of Jacques Lacan, when he locates psychoanalytic truth within language, pointing to the tropes and mathematical forms of language rather than acknowledging the persuasive appeal of identification with his words, or *transference*. So one of Kristeva's chief contributions is to bring psychoanalysis together with rhetoric and the study of language.

What Julia Kristeva helps us to see is the doubleness of how transference works—as rhetoric—both formally, as a trope, and affectively, as persuasion. Kenneth Burke argued in *A Rhetoric of Motives* that identification functions persuasively *before* any argument that might be advanced. Kristeva insists on the importance of identification, but also urges that we keep before us its *metaphoriness*—in translation one's affective investment from one identity to another is to make a *metaphorical* identification between self and other. It is also the way the ego constructs its imaginary identity. Thus the purely rhetorical category of the *ethos* and its contingent relationship to *pathos* are not merely formal matters, but the very site of our identity in culture; the rhetorical situation is where we construct, again and again, the fragile truth of our relationships.

In other words, Kristeva theorizes a recovery of a relational, collaborative view of rhetoric which in *Tales of Love* she situates not in the necessities of opposition but in the necessities of mutuality. This will seem to American feminists congruent with the project of emphasizing interpersonal relationships, which appears in work by Carol Gilligan, Mary Field Belenky, and Deborah Tannen, among others. Kristeva would not fix this difference as “feminist,” however. She worries that making gender differences into positive categories would reduce us to an oppositional logic—and to the rhetoric of dispute, antagonism, and hierarchy. She wants to avoid the feminist problem associated in the United States with essentialism and identity politics, a problem many feminists would also like to avoid, but without giving up the possibility of feminism. However, I believe that Kristeva's work supports feminist projects, perhaps providing a way out of essentialist dilemmas for advocates of a dialogic rhetoric.

Kristeva's theory upsets the traditions of rhetoric in ways that extend feminist questioning and articulate that critique with poststructuralist philosophy. The social sciences in the United States and what poststructuralism calls “the human sciences,” including also philosophy, literature, history, and linguistics, have taken a “rhetorical turn,” with theo-

rists such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Kristeva in France, and Richard Rorty and the anthropologist Clifford Geertz in the United States, arguing that knowledge is constructed by discourse. Following Nietzsche, poststructuralism posits that truth is metaphorical and figurative rather than prior to or outside language. However, there are traditions of rhetoric that are not at all compatible with the poststructuralist questioning of dominant discourses. This new interest in rhetoric sometimes ignores the historical connection of rhetoric with persuasion and with power. French critical theory, as it developed in the 1960s, when Kristeva had first arrived in Paris, sharply differentiated itself from what it saw as the “old rhetoric.” This turn *against* a certain version of rhetoric in the history of poststructuralism is very likely to have been noted by Kristeva, since her chief mentor, Roland Barthes, discussed it at length.

In a seminar he gave in 1964–1965 (“The Old Rhetoric: An Aide-Memoire”) Barthes specified in what seems to be loving detail the history of the old rhetoric he said he was leaving behind. Since he was a particularly strong influence in Kristeva's career—and she attended his seminar soon after she arrived in Paris from Bulgaria in 1965—his remarks may serve as a point of orientation to her situation within the critical discourse in France. Barthes dismissed classical rhetoric because he thought it functioned as a colonizing discourse of mastery, in the service of traditional conventionality. He resolutely left the tradition behind, in order to found the new semiotics, not because he believed that attention to the forms of rhetoric was misplaced, and not because he believed we should not learn these forms—indeed, he remarks that they now permeate our language, unbeknownst to us, an unconscious residue of past instruction. Barthes objects to the passing on of rhetorical doctrine because it pretends to control discourse and tries to eliminate what ever might upset order.

Nevertheless, he notes some elements in the history of rhetoric that will be of some importance to him, and to Kristeva. In particular he makes a very interesting distinction between “atticism” and “asianism” in rhetoric—between the “guardians of a pure vocabulary,” the “castrating ethic of ‘purity,’ which still exists today” and “an exuberant style tending toward the strange, based, like mannerism, on the effect of surprise; here the ‘figures’ play an essential role” (29). The enduring classicizing aesthetic—which he goes on to call an ethnocentrism—involved not only racism but also classism, opposing the *classicus* author to the *proletarian*. This is a hint that has interesting affinities with Kristeva's later project in *Powers of Horror*, where she will specifically take up the

problem of a rhetoric that purifies. Exclusionary rhetoric has served cultures and religions to distinguish between us and them, those who belong and those who are strangers. If by "rhetoric" we mean the project that would purify argument of its irrational elements, of whatever is foreign to reason, then neither Barthes nor Kristeva would want to be included in our list of rhetoricians. But, then, neither would most feminists, I think. Indeed, the critique of that ethnocentrism in rhetoric is of primary significance to Kristeva.

The way out of ethnocentrism is to pay attention to the interaction of subjects. Kristeva would be a rhetorician of what John Gage has called the "dialectic" rather than the technical. She is interested in a kind of knowledge that can only be rhetorical, the product of an exchange between speaking subjects. The situation of psychoanalysis is rhetorical, producing analytic knowledge in the only form that knowing can take. She does not, then, regard either writing or speech as a product representing some prior knowledge, but rather as a process, or "work in progress," that produces both the author and the audience in its text. Her special importance to women rhetoricians comes out of this attention to the *subjects* of rhetorical invention.

Kristeva proposes that we take up, through education and psychoanalysis, the insight that what we know in language, in ourselves as individuals, is a disquieting strangeness. This familiarity with the alien is what Freud called the sensation of the *uncanny*. In the practice of *disputatio*—where first one side, then the other, plays the game of claiming to be exclusively right, thus excluding contradiction—rhetoric takes its most foreign relationship to truth by excluding strangeness. Such agonistic discourse, by its insistence on absolute difference, practices an uncanny return of the truth of estrangement. Can this condition of estrangement in which humanity lives be cured? Is it not the condition of language itself? In her recent *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva prescribes psychoanalysis and education not as a cure, but as a way to disseminate the understanding that we are, in fact, all strangers, without and within. Such a stance acknowledges the constructedness and fragility of individual and community identities. The ego, like the nation, should not be defended against otherness by paranoid exclusions; it should rather be conceived as a set of processes. To show what this might mean I need to address Kristeva's conception of the speaking person as a subject-in-process and on trial.

What does Kristeva tell us about the subject? She reminds us of the dialectic that always occurs between known and unknown in language,

as between signs and affect, the symbolic and the semiotic. However, the problems for the contemporary subject are rhetorical in part, because we live in history and in a time of crisis. In another time we might have faithfully worked to reproduce the knowledge of our elders, within a stable set of conventions and beliefs regulated by religion and state—we might not even have recognized the rhetorical nature of our labor since its object would have been firmly bound within language and culture. Now we live in historical crisis, without the constraint (or the security) of institutions such as the Church; we live vulnerable to our own strangeness and faced with the task of finding ways to work together. This is both a crisis and an opportunity because the discourses of institutions of state and religion enforced sameness; they accepted the stranger only on condition that s/he be assimilated. The discourses of literature and psychoanalysis, on the other hand, provide models of a polylogic that incorporates strangeness into the language. Kristeva has argued throughout her career that the question of ethics, of horror but also of love—of human relationship—needs to be primary to the study of language.

What does Kristeva say about women as subjects? This has been a confusing question, because Kristeva has declared herself to be "anti-feminist." But the meaning of this, like Barthes's stance against rhetoric, has to be understood in terms of the cultural situation of feminism. Like other poststructuralists—in particular Althusser, Barthes, Lacan, and Derrida—Kristeva has worked to critique a positive notion of subjectivity, the humanist ideal of a free and singular individual. Therefore she fears that feminism simply resurrects the old identity together with the old problems positivism represents. This is especially important because Kristeva will go on to valorize not the state or other versions of social order but the individual—understood not as a fixed and fully conscious identity but as a subject-in-process—as the site for working through the historical crisis of modernity.

I will begin where Lacan seemed to end when he said that woman is not in language. This statement might seem like an example of wishful thinking on Lacan's part, but it might also be read as descriptive of the way language works in our culture, a location defined both by history and by community. Lacan did not invent this notorious exclusion; he rewrites Freud without escaping the history enclosing Freud. But this exclusion from the symbolic is something women have also noted, though, curiously, their objections have always seemed beside the point. Why is it impossible for women to simply speak up as women and offer

a different opinion? The structuralist response and the Marxist response have shared a similarly deterministic characterization of the subject, explaining how we are subject to language and to history, but offering no sense of how we might be the subject of a productive discourse, or act as agents of change. This exclusion has been addressed by feminists in strategies that seem contradictory: first, by assembling an enormous quantity of writing by women which seems to write *woman*, to produce a gendered subject of writing; and second, by unsettling the apparent identity of the subject, which had seemed both unified and male, un-writing *man*. The two projects seem at odds, and indeed have resulted in contention within feminism. The notion of a female identity seems to require extremes of essentialism. And apolitical fragmentation seems to be the result of poststructuralist reflexivity and critique. However, the two have worked dialectically to produce a feminist subject which is both not an identity—not essentialist—and yet political.

Kristeva can be enormously helpful to feminism because she has helped to formulate the attack on the totalizing male subject, but she has also seemed frustratingly antifeminist in her refusal to take up the categories of gender. Furthermore, her work has been criticized by several feminists, such as Andrea Nye, Juliet Flower McCannell, Nancy Fraser, and Judith Butler, who have argued that it is consonant with oppressive systems, promoting traditional images of women, overemphasizing the maternal, and even revealing a bias in favor of heterosexuality. In particular, the writing since *The Powers of Horror* has seemed to formerly friendly critics such as Paul Smith a turn away from the leftist politics of her earlier work. Joan Brandt writes out of her interest in Kristeva's project: Kristeva, she says, is out to subvert the power of scientific discourse, the positivism of Linguistics, "to show that the assumption of objectivity at the root of Western positivist thought is actually grounded in a subjectivity that orders and systematizes and that remains uncritical, indeed, unaware of the ideological underpinnings of its own constructs" (135–36). However, Brandt accuses Kristeva of the very binary thinking that her theory critiques. I believe that many of these critics are misreading a complex theory. Some may be promoting exclusivist ideas themselves. Kelly Oliver points out that critics of Kristeva read her in contradictory, sometimes opposite, ways. Oliver notes that this suggests a failure to take the tension among categories in her work into account. It also suggests that it is not so easy to write within a dialogic rhetoric; even when one is critical of positivist thought.

Far from contributing to the paranoia of exclusivist positions, Kristeva advocates—and practices—a rhetoric that is enabling for women and for men too, a healthy critique of obsessive certainties that makes philosophy more rhetorical. The move Kristeva wants to make, from language seen as a product to language seen as a process, overlaps with categories that are familiar to scholars and teachers involved in the recent history of American composition and rhetoric. For Kristeva, the crisis in political and philosophical foundations has accompanied the possibility of thinking about language itself, and the speaking subject, as a *process*. The subject-in-process is defined by a constant renewal of struggle, or crisis. This means that the speaking subject is deeply involved with the historical shifts experienced by contemporary Western cultures, and with the possibility of working out better ways of living together. She says "modernity . . . has rendered the crisis explicit. And . . . it has minimized the moments of equilibrium. One can think of it this way: previous social forms counted on a certain calm and the crisis came periodically, while now, an epoch has opened when we live in permanent crisis. And what is provisional is the moment of *status-quo*" ("Interview," 165).

The "status-quo" is provisional, and writing does not function merely to express fictions and identities (male or female). Writing works to *produce* these identities, often by repressing difference. Therefore Kristeva privileges not the generic language of clarity or of communication, but *poetic language*, by which she means a use of language that is genuinely dialogic; that allows the inclusion of the foreign, the strange, the unconscious—the woman. Yet to her critics, the idea that *art* can change the world by changing language has seemed naïve, and the idea that woman is the most likely of marginal subjects, best witness to strangeness and difference, is nevertheless not connected to any positive notions of politicized gender. When Kristeva talks about "woman," she means to take up the Lacanian idea that woman is not *in* language and to valorize that very absence. Woman unsettles the repressive identity-making work of the language that would deny process. Rhetoric has itself repressed the *rhetoricity* of *all* discourse, working against itself. Kristeva opposes a feminism or a rhetoric that tries to deny marginality.

At the same time that many feminists are declaring the end of marginality for women, Kristeva is arguing that the crisis of modernity makes all of us marginal subjects. What Kristeva wants to emphasize is the importance of resisting the dominations of sameness and order. This resistance does not mean that Kristeva advocates a rhetoric of hysteria, which would oppose clarity and order in the name of the irrational. In-

stead she posits a kind of hysteria *within* the mastery of rational rhetoric, which would enable resistance to transform language from within. It is the woman *not in* language who provides the site of the strangeness that generates resistance, as she explains:

I am very attached to this idea of the woman as irrecoverable foreigner. But I know that certain American feminists do not think well of such an idea, because they want a positive notion of woman. But one can be positive by starting with this permanent marginality, this motor of change. So I think that for me femininity is exactly this lunar form, like the moon is the inverse of the sun of our identity. From this point of view, perhaps we women have it more than the men, but the men have it also. And to try to preserve this part as unreconcilable permits us perhaps always to be what Hegel called the eternal irony of the community. That is to say, a sort of vigilance apart which keeps groups from closing up, becoming homogeneous and so aggressive. That is, I see the role of women as a sort of vigilance, a strangeness, always on guard and contestatory.

In fact, it's the role of the hysteric, a little, but why not: Larceny that altogether. We can play our hysterics without necessarily making a psychodrama and exposing ourselves to be the victims of the male order, but with great lucidity and . . . great mastery and measure. That is, perverse hysterics. Very wise. ("Interview," 168-69)

If woman is an "irrecoverable foreigner," how does Kristeva theorize woman and the sign? In an early work, "The Bounded Text," she argues that the history of the sign has implications for the *subject*. Novelistic discourse constitutes the sign as "nondisjunctive," not allowing both sides of the dialectic, but rather insisting on identity and exclusion. Woman functions in this logic as a "pseudo-center" excluding the other, which is then constituted as the subject. In other words, the figure of woman as different defines the difference of the subject. We could see this in operation in Freud's text, where the sight of the little girl generates the little boy's sense of himself as well as his fear of castration. However, Kristeva does not read the Freudian text as altogether bounded, under the sign of absolute identity. She shifts her reading of Freud toward the importance of uncertainty in his texts. The Freudian discovery Kristeva emphasizes is the discovery of an unconscious that inhabits reason itself, that marks the crisis of the subject by producing a crisis within the identity of the nondisjunctive sign. Thus Kristeva's reading of Freud unsettles the absolute distinction of boy and girl, ex-